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Experimental and quasi-experimental criminological research in the Netherlands

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This special issue of the journal is focused on experimental and quasi-experimental research in the Netherlands. It includes four Dutch studies of crime and law enforcement and one paper dealing with the practical implementation of (randomized) experiments and evaluation research in the Dutch criminal justice system. These papers reflect the most recent developments in criminology and criminal justice in the Netherlands, a country with hardly any tradition in experimental criminological research.

In the first half of the 20th century, only one experimental study was developed in Holland. In 1921 Jan de Jongh received his Ph.D. in medicine at the University of Amsterdam for a quasi-experimental study on the changes in moral judgments of boys and girls of different age groups. The experimental groups were in custody at that time, and the control groups consisted of ‘normal’ juveniles (De Jongh 1921). No other experimental study was published after this Ph.D. One of the reasons might

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be that, in those years, Dutch criminologists were mostly criminal lawyers with little or no training in social science methods. Descriptive and normative criminology was then common practice at universities. In the 1960s and 1970s, sociologists and political philosophers dominated the Dutch criminology departments, some of them initiating large-scale surveys. The lone exception was in 1965, when the future Gröningen professor of criminology, Wouter Buikhuisen, carried out for his Ph.D. a natural (quasi-) experiment by measuring the effects when students were instructed to instigate riots during New Year's Eve on the public streets and squares (Buikhuisen 1965). One of the hypotheses he tested was that instigators will stimulate the public to riot compared with people in control areas without instigators. Later, one of his own Ph.D. students advocated the use of randomized experiments on the effects of (variations in) punishment on recidivism, especially drunken driving (Steenhuis 1972). He advocated, among others, randomized experiments to assess the effects of general deterrence on potential offenders.

After these modest initial attempts to establish a new tradition in Dutch criminology,¹ only a few and scattered published studies paid attention to experimental or quasi-experimental research methods (Bruinsma et al. 2001). This remarkable observation about the state of criminological research during all these years is in contrast with the enormous tradition of experimentation and innovation in criminal justice practices in the Netherlands after the Second World War. The country is well known throughout the world for its innovative practices in finding new ways to deal with criminals, alternative sanctions, lenient instead of severe punishment and, tolerance to deviant behaviour in general ('*gedogen*') (Tonry and Bijleveld 2007). These innovations extended across the whole criminal justice system, ranging from the police to probation. Later in the 1980s, all kinds of new approaches to the prevention of minor offences (mostly committed by juvenile offenders) were planned and carried out to restrain the increase in registered crime in our country (Bijleveld and Smit 2005). Stimulated by additional financial support from the central government, the police, private institutions and local governmental agencies set up a great variety of projects and local prevention interventions. However, solid evaluation research lagged behind. The numbers of criminologists had diminished at that time, and the few remaining at the universities played little role in evaluating government programmes.

Almost all of the innovations in criminal justice were evaluated by the practitioners themselves or by commercial research bureaux focusing more on process evaluations than on outcome evaluations. The effectiveness of these innovative practices was neglected in these studies (Bruinsma 1992; Van der Laan 2001).

A conference of the Dutch Society of Criminology on the subject of minor crimes and governmental policy in 1990 was dedicated to the problems associated with too much involvement of criminologists in prevention activities and to the problems of finding the best theory on which to build these practical experiments (Zwanenburg and Smit 1990). From a different perspective² Polder (1992) and Bruinsma (1992)

¹Our review does not refer to experimental research by psychologists who sometimes included offenders or criminal justice officers in their samples.

²Polder based his conclusion on a meta-analysis of 200 prevention projects, and Bruinsma grounded his on methodological and theoretical criteria of the evaluations that were carried out in these years.

stated later that the lack of high-quality research made it impossible to estimate the effects of crime in the new programmes and practices of the 1980s. However, this conclusion did not impact on public policy, and, through the 1990s, there continued to be a lack of solid experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation of crime and justice programs.

An emerging experimental criminology in the Netherlands

The turn of the century led to dramatic changes in the nature of the ways in which crime and justice research is funded, managed and implemented in the Netherlands. Over the last decades of the 20th century the research infrastructure of criminology and criminal justice was dominated by the Research and Documentation Centre of the Ministry of Justice. The Centre was the primary recipient of resources for criminal justice research during this period and employed the largest number of crime and justice researchers. At the same time, criminology as a discipline had declined in the universities, and, thus, there was little academic interest in criminology and criminal justice. At the turn of the century, this trend was reversed, which naturally led crime and justice research in the Netherlands to become more interested in the developing innovations in research methods and criminological theory that had been emerging in the USA and the UK (Farrington 2003).

In 2000, the independent Netherlands Institute for the Study of Crime and Law Enforcement (NSCR) began to reorganize its fundamental research programme to reflect international trends in the science of criminology. It also began to attract a new generation of talented and innovative researchers. Three prestigious universities in the Netherlands have initiated bachelor and master programmes in criminology (Leiden, Rotterdam and Amsterdam), allowing them not only to train a new generation of criminologists but also to offer employment to promising young scholars. A large number of Ph.D. students from different universities and institutes are now organized in a Research School drawing from the three universities and the NSCR in which they are being trained in theory and methodology. These improvements have made Dutch criminology less dependent on applied contract research, and have given ample opportunities for scholars to emphasize theoretical and methodological issues that were mostly ignored in the prior generation of criminology in the Netherlands in the 25 years before. Although applied policy research is still important in criminology and criminal justice studies in the Netherlands, policy makers and financing agencies are no longer dominating the overall criminological research agenda (Bruinsma et al. 2001).

These changes in the infrastructure of criminology in the Netherlands have encouraged independent critical work in crime and justice. Independent research has stimulated theoretical and methodological innovation in Dutch criminology and has brought it closer to the international research agenda in the field. The NSCR, for example, is very much involved in theory testing with longitudinal data and has carried out small experiments focusing on the causal mechanisms of theories in areas such as sentencing, public support of sentencing, criminal careers, reporting behaviour of victims and witnesses, and testimonies in trials. In this issue of the journal four papers illustrating this new direction in experimental research are included.

During the past 5 years, the ‘What works’ perspective has become more influential in Dutch criminology and criminal justice policy. The activities of the Campbell Crime and Justice Group have been well received. The systematic reviews on specific topics of this Campbell Group have been cited more often and have found their way into criminological teaching and research. Criminologists have adopted innovations in methods, including the use of randomized controlled evaluations of criminal justice practices.

There is also a tendency among politicians and civil servants in the Netherlands to become more interested in evidence-based policy. Under pressure from public opinion and by a more attentive Parliament, the government has to give account of the visible results of their policies. The activities of the Campbell Crime and Justice Group and its encouragement of systematic reviews of evidenced-based interventions play an important role in this change in criminal justice policy. The Minister of Justice installed in 2005 a ‘national review committee of behavioural interventions of justice’ to judge and evaluate behavioural treatment programmes of penitentiaries and treatment institutions using evidence-based criteria.

The contributions of studies in this issue

It cannot be denied that the resistance in the field against randomization is still very strong. It is, in practice, difficult to change the attitudes of police officers, public prosecutors and judges on randomized experiments. Criminal lawyers put forward several valid arguments against randomization that are well known in the international literature. De Roos (2007), for instance, advocated great caution, because randomization violates three principles (equality, proportionality, and individualization) of criminal sentencing. Moreover, he stated that all criminal justice officers are aware, and most of them accept as well, that there is no optimal effectiveness of sanctions. In that context, why would we expend so much effort and face so many problems in developing randomized experimental evaluations of criminal justice programmes. The contribution of Asscher et al. in this issue addresses this topic extensively. They report on their efforts to implement randomized evaluations on the effectiveness of multi-systematic therapy (MST). In the Netherlands hundreds of serious and frequent juvenile offenders have been subjected to all kinds of treatment interventions yearly, but with limited success. The authors show that the recent introduction of MST is promising, but that experimental methods are critical in assessing this intervention. Nonetheless, the resistance in clinical practice to randomized experiments is still significant. They describe the difficulties faced in overcoming this resistance and show that it is partially due to misunderstandings of basic principles of research.

Bijleveld reports on a successful experiment on fare dodging. She compared the effectiveness of the standard approach by the National Railway Company (civil law) with the criminal law approach of the public prosecutor. On the basis of data on fare dodgers from two cities, who were randomly assigned to one of these approaches, she concluded that the criminal law approach performs significantly worse than the standard approach of the National Railway Company.

Experimental studies are rare in victimology. Despite a growing body of empirical studies, we know very little about the impact of the environment on reporting behaviour of victims. Goudriaan and Nieuwbeerta used a vignette experimental design to test the effects on crime reporting of the location of the crime (public versus private), the extent to which the victim and the offender knew each other and, of the fact that both offender and victim are part of the same organization. By varying these factors systematically, they analysed the data of 499 juveniles' about their willingness to report a violent crime. The authors concluded, among other things, that a socio-ecological explanation of reporting behaviour of victims is needed in victimology.

Two papers in this issue deal with the fragile relationship between judges and the public. In general it is assumed in the literature that there exists a gap between the public and judges on the preferred severity of sentences. It is also suggested that this gap is caused by the lack of specific and detailed information on criminal cases to part of the general public. Both papers studied the effect of information on the preferred sentences. De Keijser, Van Koppen and Elffers report on three empirical studies: (1) a survey among a sample of the Dutch population; (2) an experiment among judges in Criminal Courts and, (3) a survey among another sample of the Dutch population using the same material as for the judges. The Dutch public is more punitive than the judges. The hypothesis that the availability of similar information will reduce harsher penalties was rejected by the studies. However, additional analyses showed that attitudinal variables do make a difference. Elffers, De Keijser, Van Koppen and Van Haeringen report on the effect of media information on the public's attitudes towards the criminal justice system. By using a field, quasi-experimental, before-and-after design, with systematically varied information by a local Dutch newspaper, they found no effects of 20 items on the attitudes of the respondents towards the criminal justice system or towards severity of sentencing.

Lessons from Dutch criminology

What can the international community learn from *Dutch* experimental research? Firstly, Farrington and Welsh (2005) concluded recently that only a few experiments have been carried out outside the USA or the UK. The Netherlands is one of the European countries, and Dutch research can offer additional empirical data and ideas to systematic reviews and evaluations of policy in the area of policing, prevention, corrections, court and community. Dutch society differs a good deal from that of the USA in several respects. The Dutch have relatively small cities in one of the most urbanized countries in the world, a more European culture, a global and open perspective as a small country; they have different criminal laws, a less severe policy against deviant people and against offenders in general, and they are traditionally open to innovation in the criminal justice system. The Dutch 'tolerance'—framed in the word 'gedogen'—implies less strict law enforcement and a less punitive criminal law. The structure and practice of the criminal justice system and the criminal laws thus differ in many respects from those of the American, Australian, Asian, and even other European, countries. That makes Dutch research interesting for the

international community of criminology. But, besides practical policy research, Dutch experimental research can contribute to test originally Anglo–American explanations in a different setting. The results of tests of the causal mechanisms in explanations under controlled conditions will be for the benefit of criminology in general.

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